God Loves Movies

By Brian Godawa

God *loves* movies. I don't mean that they are merely "allowable" entertainment. I mean that movies may well be the strongest 21st century adaptation of biblical communication. How can I say this? Because movies are visually dramatic stories, and in the Bible, the dominant means through which God communicates is visually dramatic stories -- *not* systematic theology, *not* doctrinal catechism, and *not* rational argument. As biblically allowable as each of these other modern modes of communication are (and I certainly would not consider them useless), they simply do not hold a candle to the power and effectiveness of visually dramatic storytelling that God uses to bring His message to the world.

A survey of the Scriptures reveals that roughly thirty percent of the Bible is expressed through rational propositional truth and laws. While seventy percent of the Bible is story, vision, symbol and narrative.[1] Sure, God uses words, rationality and propositions to communicate his message. But modernist Christianity has neglected to understand how much more important visual imagery, drama and storytelling are to God.

Visually

Movies are a visual medium. Through composition, color, light, and cinematic movement films confer emotional states and embody symbolic meanings and ideas. Visual imagery is one way to communicate connections that may bypass rational faculties or embody them in a different way. Many of us can remember the sense of awe we felt at a majestic panoramic depiction of the battle of good and evil in *The Lord of the Rings*. Millions attest to the depth of spiritual illumination they experienced through *the Passion of the Christ* as it incarnated the atonement imagery of Isaiah 53 and the Gospels into a visual punch in the spiritual gut.

The thousands of miracles that God performed for his people in the Bible were not mere abstract propositions, but sensate "signs and wonders" intended to elicit faith through a visual display of God's glory.[2]

God's own Temple was designed by Him to be a visually rich engagement of the senses as his people worshipped him, surrounded by colors, images, pictures and statues of visual beauty.[3]

New Covenant sacraments are visual expressions of our faith that are not reducible to abstract propositions. Augustine called them "the visible sign of an invisible grace."[4] Baptism visually depicts death, resurrection and cleansing. The Lord's Supper paints an existential picture of unity with God.

And then there are dreams and visions: God's form of television and movies. Joseph's dreams of fat and skinny zombie cows (Gen. 41), Ezekiel's Close Encounters with spinning wheels (Eze. 1), Nebuchadnezzar's Terminator statue (Dan. 2), as well as other visions given to dozens of Old *and* New Testament saints are all stunning high-definition, Dolby sensurround feasts for the senses as well as the spirit. God loves movies. He produced a lot of them.

The book of Revelation is an epic vision, a virtual orgy of visual imagery and theater, written and directed by Jesus Christ. The images of apocalyptic horsemen, multiple-headed beasts and monsters running around killing people are more akin to a modern horror film or fantasy epic than a systematic theology or doctrinal exposition.

God does not merely use images to reveal his *message*. He often uses images to reveal *Himself*. A burning bush, a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire, a "glory cloud" that covered the tabernacle, and an angelic messenger are just a few choice examples. From Old to New Testament, God's favorite visual images to use for his presence seem to be thunder, lightning, clouds, smoke, and fire (Ex. 19:16-18; Rev. 11:19). Tentpole spectacular! And no blue screen CGI!

Dramatic

Movies are all about drama. Drama is relationship in action. It is existential rather than rational or intellectual. In a sense, drama is a relational incarnation of rational abstraction. As we see characters working through their moral dilemmas and personal journeys, so we learn through them and find our answers along with them. It may be acceptable to rationally explain the concept of justification through forensic declaration, but the power of seeing Jean Valjean being forgiven in *Les Miserables*, embodies that truth existentially like no theological exposition possibly could.

God seems to have more interest in drama than do many Christians. Rather than merely give sermons or lectures, God often had his prophets give plays. Ezekiel could be considered a thespian prophet. God told him to perform a war epic as a prophecy, complete with a miniature city besieged by battering rams (Ezek. 4:1-3). Then God has Ezekiel engage in the longest-running Off-Off-Broadway performance of the time in a dramatic symbolic enactment for 430 days (Eze. 4:4-8). And that's only a third of the amount of theatrical prophecies that God had for Ezekiel.[5]

Jeremiah is called "the weeping prophet." But he should have been called "the acting prophet," because so many of his prophecies were theatrical performances.[6] God wasn't just dramatic, he broke the social taboos of propriety with R-rated shocking performance art when he commanded Isaiah to walk around naked as a *visual* "sign and token" of Israel's shame (Isa. 20:2-4).

In the New Testament, God uses the Lucas-like special visual effects of a picnic blanket from heaven filled with unclean animals to persuade Peter of the New Covenant inclusion of Gentiles (Acts 10). God, it seems, is the original Cecil B. DeMille. Mere words were not enough for Him. He wanted drama, He wanted lights, camera, action!

Several books of the Bible are deliberately structured according to theatrical conventions. The books of Job and Jonah are depicted in dialogues reminiscent of ancient plays, including prologues, epilogues, and several acts. Job's friends function as the chorus of ancient theatrical performances. The book of Mark structurally resembles a Greek tragedy that contains a prologue (Mk 1:1–15), complications (Mk 1:16–8:26), a recognition scene (Mk 8:27–30) and a reversal of the fortunes of the leading character followed by the denouement (Mk 8:31–16:8).[7] God loves the visual, and God loves drama. But even more, He loves visually dramatic *stories*.

Stories

Movies are first and foremost stories. And so is the Bible. The Bible is the story of God's redemptive activity in history. The Bible is not a systematic theological textbook. It communicates doctrine and theology mostly through story. Storytelling draws us into truth by incarnating worldview through narrative. Creation, Fall, and Redemption, the elements of a worldview, are a narrative progression of events that can be seen in all movies.[8] For example, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Creation would be embodied in the happy life of the Shire. The Fall is captured in Sauron and his minions enslaving Middle Earth. And Redemption is achieved when Frodo throws the Ring into Mount Doom and destroys Sauron.

Stories are means of understanding truth through existential inhabitation of the story. As we enter into the stories and see ourselves in it, we see truth in a way that mere logical or doctrinal discourse simply cannot achieve. As Abraham Kuyper explained in reference to Biblical literary narrative, "revelation strikes all the chords of the soul, and not just one, e.g., the rational one. This makes it clear that the historical doctrine of revelation is not the barren propositional one it is often charged with being."[9]

Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God mostly through parables. And those parables communicated invisible reality in terms of visible, sensate, dramatic stories. To him, the Kingdom was far too deep and rich a truth to entrust to rational abstract propositions. He chose stories of weddings, investment bankers, unscrupulous slaves, and buried treasure over syllogisms, abstraction, systematics or dissertations. And his usage of such metaphors and images was not a "primitive" form of discourse, as if ancient Jews were not sophisticated enough to understand abstraction. In fact, at the time of the writing of the New Testament, Israel was immersed in the Hellenistic culture that dominated the Middle East with its heavily abstracted thinking. Jesus could do abstraction. He preferred not to.

It would be more accurate to suggest the other way around, that indeed, stories and parables may be a superior means of conveying theological truth than propositional logic or theological abstraction. As N.T. Wright suggests, "it would be clearly quite wrong to see these stories as mere illustrations of truths that could in principle have been articulated in a purer, more abstract form."[10] He reminds us that theological terms like "monotheism" "are late constructs, convenient shorthands for sentences with verbs in them [narrative], and that sentences with verbs in them are the real stuff of theology, not mere childish expressions of a 'purer' abstract truth."[11]

Kenneth E. Bailey, an expert on Middle Eastern New Testament studies, explains that "a biblical story is not simply a 'delivery system' for an idea. Rather, the story first creates a world and then invites the listener to live in that world, to take it on as part of who he or she is… In reading and studying the Bible, ancient tales are not examined merely in order to extract a theological principle or ethical model."[12] Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer agrees that doctrinal propositions are not "more basic" than the narrative, and in fact, fail to communicate what narrative can. He writes in his book, *The Drama of Doctrine*, "Narratives make story-shaped points that cannot always be paraphrased in propositional statements without losing something in translation."[13] If

you try to scientifically dissect the parable you will kill it, and if you discard the carcass once you have your doctrine, you have discarded the heart of God.

In conclusion, because of our modern western bias toward rational theological discourse, we are easily blinded to the biblical emphasis on visually dramatic stories. We downplay the visual as dangerous or irrational, while God embraces the visual as a vital means of communicating his message. We elevate rational discourse as superior and drama or theater as too emotional or entertainment-oriented, while God elevates drama equally with rational discourse as part of our imago dei. We consider stories to be quaint illustrations of abstract doctrinal universal truths, while God uses stories as his dominant means of incarnating truth. Movies are visually dramatic stories. Some Christians tolerate movies as acceptable entertainment, but as we have seen, God takes it much more serious than that. God *loves* movies.

Brian Godawa is the screenwriter for the award-winning feature film, *To End All Wars*. He is the author of *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment* (InterVarsity Press, 2002). This article was adapted from his forthcoming book, *Word Pictures: Knowing God Through Story and Imagination*.

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[1] Of course, most of the propositional content and imagery is integrated with each other, so a strictly "scientific" separation is not possible. Both are necessary to God's revelation, but the sheer comparison of volume is revealing.
[2] See Heb 2:4 Deut. 6:22; Dan. 4:1-3; Acts 14:3; 2 Cor. 12:12.
[3] Exodus 25; 28; 1 Kings 6, 2 Chronicles 3; 4.
[4] Allan D Fitzgerald et. al. ed. *Augustine Through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans 1999), 707.
[5] See also Ezekiel 5:1-4; 12:1-11; 17-20; 37:15-23.
[6] See Jeremiah 13:1-11; 19:1; 17:19-27; 27:1-14; 32:6-15; 43:8-13; 51:59-64.
[7] "Theater," *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, © 1998 by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA, Electronic text hypertexted and prepared by OakTree Software, Inc.Version 1.0.
[8] See Brian Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment* (Downers Grove, Intervarsity Press, 2002).
[9] Kevin J Vanhoozer, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature," in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, eds. D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1986), 78.
[10] N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 77.
[11] *Ibid*, 78. Quoting Wright will no doubt brand me a heretic by those whose Pharisaical obsession with theological minutia will not allow anyone to quote anyone unless they have exhaustive agreement in every jot and tittle of dogma.
[12] Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jacob and the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 51.
[13] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 50.